

WESTWAYS

SEPTEMBER 1973





Wind- and sea-swept rocks: three of the Coronados from a South Island promontory

LOS CORONADOS

By Jerry Ruhlow

HAZE DRAPES the four distant isles in a ghostly shroud. Winds moan perpetually through their barren peaks. Centuries of pounding seas have carved the rocky shore into grotesque formations and left tiny coves and inlets rich with sea life. These are the Coronado Islands. The islands of mystery.

While volumes have been written about California's coastal islands to the north, information on the Mexico-owned Coronados group is meager, and it is difficult to sift fact from legend in the musty files of old newspapers and ever-changing scientific reports.

The only publication I found devoted entirely to these islands is a thirty-six-page pamphlet, *Los Coronados Islands*, by Helen Ellsberg (published by La Siesta Press in Glendale, California).

Beyond that, the researcher must rely on the microfilm files of old newspapers available in the San Diego Public Library; seek the occasional reference in books on California and Baja California history; read the published scientific reports, and talk with scientists who have studied the islands and their ecology.

The Coronados are best known to the deep-sea fishermen who have fished nearby waters since the 1800s. A San Diego newspaper reported in 1870 that Captain S. S. Dunnells, in the steamer *Vaquero*, was scheduling excursions "... intent on fishing and egg gathering." Round-trip fare was one dollar, and included band music.

That same year, another report stated that the Davis and Purdy companies began fishing the waters commercially, and between February and October shipped twenty-five tons of rock cod.

Today, the island waters are closed to commercial fishing, but sport anglers pay about twenty dollars (that doesn't include band music) to fish the islands, and still bring in sacks heavy with rock cod, yellowtail, albacore, barracuda and other game fish.

The islands were discovered by Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, who was apparently not too impressed by what he saw, on September 27, 1542. He sailed by without bothering to stop, but recorded that the islands had no soil or life and called them the *Islas Desiertas* (Desert Islands). About sixty years later, on November 9, 1602, Sebastián Vizcaíno came upon the islands again, but he decided to name them the *Islas de San Martín*.

However, Father Antonio de la Ascensión, who accompanied Vizcaíno on the voyage, had other ideas. He referred to them as the *Cuatro*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSEPH R. JEHL, JR.

Coronados (the Four Coronados) in his diary.

It's plain to see who had the most influence aboard that vessel, for even though San Martín appeared as the name on early charts from Vizcaíno's voyage, it is Father Ascensión's name that has lasted.

Even so, there's controversy as to whom the priest chose to honor with the name. Some say they are named for the explorer who sought the Seven Cities of Cibola; others claim they are named after a Francisco Coronado, administrator of the province of Xalisco (now Jalisco) under Cortez (the U.S. Navy adopts this latter theory and presents it as fact in a Hydrographic Office publication).

There are still other theories, but the most credible is that they are named for the four Coronado brothers who were martyred under Roman Emperor Diocletian in the year 303. Since the anniversary of the martyrdom coincides with the Vizcaíno expedition's discovery date, it seems likely that the brothers were those Father Ascensión chose to honor.

Through the years, the islands, individually and as a group, have had various unofficial names, including Dead Man's Island, Mummy Island, Cortez Island, the Sarcophagi and the Sentinels. All still crop up now and then, but officially they are called North Island, South Island, Middle

Island and Middle Rock.

The most concise description of the Coronados and their locations appears in the U.S. Navy's Hydrographic Office Bulletin Number 84 dealing with the west coasts of Mexico and Central America. We may not agree with its historical evaluation, but the office does have a reputation for accuracy in more technical matters:

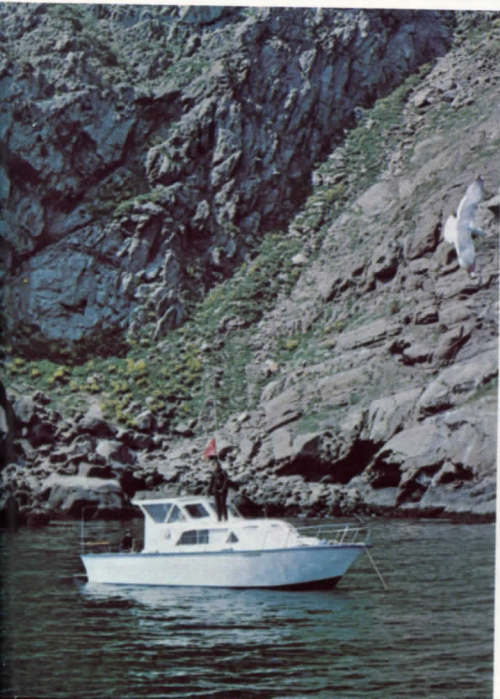
"Los Coronados islets . . . are a group of four high, bold and barren rocks lying, in their nearest part, seven miles off the coast and about the same distance to the southward of the (United States-Mexico) boundary, and extending about five miles in a northwest and southeast direction.

"The southernmost and largest islet (South Island) is about two miles long and one-half mile wide, and rises near the southern end to a height of 672 feet, appearing as a wedge-shaped mass when seen from the northward or the southward. . . .

"The islet second in size and the northwesternmost of the group (North Island) . . . is about a mile long, one-quarter mile wide, and 467 feet high. The passage between this islet and the others is one and one-half miles wide, with from seventeen to fifty fathoms of water and numerous patches of kelp."

The bulletin points out that boats may safely land in a small cove, open

The old casino now houses a small military garrison and the men's families. Below left, the Coronados are popular for sport fishing and diving. Below right, a view of the lighthouse on South Island





to the northward, near the anchorage. But such a landing is not advised without obtaining a special permit through the Mexican Consul.

The islands have been closed to the casual visitor for many years. Amin Zarur, chief of fisheries for the Mexican government in San Diego, said that "in theory, nobody can land there."

Zarur added, "This area is very rich for fishing and wildlife and we must conserve it for that reason, but if you wish to study the islands you can obtain the permit."

A small military garrison of about five men and their families lives at an abandoned casino and hotel on South Island. Supplies for them and the lighthouse keeper are brought by boat from Ensenada every fifteen days.

Zarur also said that the Mexican government is studying a new system of limits and regulations for fishing the waters around the Coronados. Present law calls for a catch not to exceed thirty-five pounds, but he admits the regulation is confusing and not being enforced. He said he expects a new pending fish and game law will more closely parallel that of California.

A fishing license is required for all Mexican territorial waters. If you fish aboard the open party or charter boats from San Diego the license is



Brown pelicans are among the many sea fowl found on the Coronados. But the birds' existence there has been threatened by pesticides in their food, which weaken the eggshell and cause it to crack easily

included in your ticket price. A private boat license is eight dollars per month or ninety-six dollars per year.

Dr. John Cannon, professor of geology at Cerritos College and an authority on the geology of Baja California, said the islands were once part of the Peninsular Ranges that extend from the Santa Ana Mountains near San Jacinto to the tip of Baja.

Although some published reports claim the Coronados were volcanic in origin, Dr. Cannon explained that, like California's Channel Islands, they were formed when compressional forces beneath the earth's crust created a downfault that eventually caused them to drop off from the mainland.

Dr. Carl Hubbs, of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography at La Jolla, has studied the islands extensively since first visiting them as a boy in 1907. According to Dr. Hubbs, the islands were connected with the mainland in recent geological times—not much more than 10,000 years ago—which accounts for some of the wildlife that could not otherwise have reached the islands.

"There is indication that the Indians utilized the North Island, but water is so short that it is not likely that they lived there," he said. "I suspect they went out and camped to



The Coronados, declared a bird sanctuary by Mexico in 1924, are home for numerous birds and mammals. Among them are cormorants, left; gulls, top; and playful sea lions, above

get food. There are many small caves which Indians could have used for shelter, but the middens are thin and scattered.

"I was working a midden on the hogback of North Island a few years ago to see what kind of shellfish I could uncover, and found the skull of a sea otter. Radiocarbon tests dated it to within the last 300 years, so we know the Indians were there then," he added.

"The Diegueño Indians fished barracuda and tuna, so we also know they had boats and could have gone between the mainland and the islands. While hiking up a steep slope of North Island another time, I saw a dark spot in the soil indicating the presence of charcoal. I worked the

area and found several hundred bones of the Cassin's auklet, a bird that still nests there. There were over 100 individual leg bones, so they must have had a real honest-to-God feast," Dr. Hubbs said.

Most unusual wildlife on the isles are the absurd-looking elephant seals, first recorded about 1950 by UCLA biology professor George Bartholomew when he visited the Coronados with Dr. Hubbs. It is estimated that about seventy animals form the colony on South Island.

Dr. Hubbs explained that the sea otter once inhabited the area, but is presumed to have been wiped out by the fur hunters early in the last century. One was sighted in the near-by Point Loma kelp beds about three

years ago, however, so there is hope that it may one day reestablish itself in the area.

Other marine mammals residing on the Coronados are the harbor seal, mostly on Middle Island, and the sea lion, which may be found on all four islands but has its largest colony on North Island.

The common deer mouse and the cottontail rabbit also abound on the Coronados, but when you try to determine how they got there you suddenly find a whole new set of theories. Suffice it to say, nobody really knows for sure.

About ten varieties of reptiles call the Coronados home. Among them are the coastal whiptail lizard, California side-blotched lizard, Coronado

Island skink, Coronado Island alligator lizard and the Coronado Island rattlesnake. The latter is a subspecies of rattler not found any place but South Coronado Island where it feasts on a diet of lizards.

Here, as elsewhere along the Pacific Coast, pesticides have taken a heavy toll of bird life, particularly the brown pelican which is in considerable danger of being extirpated in these island nesting areas. Pesticides in the marine life on which the birds feed have built up in their systems, and as a result the eggshells are soft and break when the bird attempts to set on them.

The islands were declared a bird sanctuary by the Mexican government in 1924, but much damage had already been done by visitors. Birds were shot for sport, tourists trampled nesting sites and eggs (remember Captain Dunnell's egg-gathering tours as early as 1870?) were collected indiscriminately.

Still, there are a variety of gulls, pelicans, petrels, auklets, cormorants and other seabirds to be found nesting in the rocks or soaring overhead in their constant search for food.

Land birds are also abundant on the islands. In May 1968 Dr. Jarad Diamond, who works in bird ecology and evolution at the UCLA department of physiology, headed a bird survey of the Coronados—the most comprehensive since 1917. He reported four new resident species of land birds—the kestrel, black phoebe, house wren and chipping sparrow. But four species reported in the earlier survey—the peregrine falcon, Allen's hummingbird, the raven and the barn swallow—had disappeared.

Among other resident land birds censused by Dr. Diamond's party were the California quail, white-throated swift, rock wren and linnet. More than a dozen other species of land birds were also counted, but not presumed to be resident.

No self-respecting island would be without a pirate legend, and the Coronados are no exception.

It seems during the days of Cali-

fornia's Gold Rush, Captain Jose Arvaez, a black-hearted scoundrel, made his headquarters at the Coronados, and preyed on coastal traffic to and from the goldfields.

He was getting along just dandy by the simple expedient of killing everybody aboard a captured ship and sinking the vessel. According to the legend, the ships were reported as lost, with nobody the wiser.

As the story goes, he made an exception when he captured the vessel *Chelsea* and let a cabin boy named Tom Bolter stay alive when the boy claimed he knew the sailing schedules of other ships and offered to join the pirate band. The information was good and business prospered, but Bolter grew too ambitious and quarreled with Arvaez over his share.

Bolter quickly learned that one doesn't argue with a pirate chief. Since he still knew the sailing dates of other ships he managed to stay alive, but found himself imprisoned in a cave when Arvaez next ventured forth. Somehow, he got one guard's rifle, knocked him out and shot the other guard. He then sailed to San Diego in a small boat, told his story and gathered volunteers to go back and trap the pirates. Arvaez and his unsuspecting crew came ashore, and journeyed back to San Diego dangling from the yardarms.

The hero of the day, Bolter was rewarded liberally from the pirate treasure. But success went to his head and he became an insufferable boor and waterfront pest. When it occurred to somebody that they had forgotten to hang the worst of the pirate band, Tom decided on a trip to Mexico and was not heard from again.

A fascinating story. But sadly, it is little more. A legend which fades to fiction in the light of history.

There are other pirate tales, but they, too, have little in fact to back them. William Murphy, a *Los Angeles Times* writer-photographer, is also an authority on the pirates and buccaneers of which he frequently writes. According to him, there are no substantiated pirate stories connected with the Coronado Islands.

But the islands have been the base of scoundrels that make Arvaez look like a scoutmaster. For example, there were the bootleggers and smugglers that thought nothing of shooting up the federal authorities or dropping a load of illegal immigrant laborers over the side when the going got tough.

A number of businesses flourished on the islands during the 1880s, and records show their titles changed hands several times during that century.

Abalone fishermen did a profitable business selling the shells for jewelry and there were various efforts to quarry stone for construction and railroad use. Plans for a copper mining venture were announced in the newspapers, but there is no indication that much ever came of these ambitious plans.

On June 10, 1932, the *San Diego Union* ran a headline, "Coronado Island Site for Resort—\$200,000 Enterprise with 20-Year Lease Announced by Hamilton and Escobedo."

Fred C. Hamilton and Mariano Escobedo built the Coronado Yacht Club, and about a year later, with great fanfare, opened a casino, cabaret, cafe and rental cottages.

The club flourished briefly until Prohibition ended in 1933, and continued to struggle along as a gambling resort until 1934 when Mexico outlawed gaming. New management tried to turn it into another Avalon in 1935, offering music, dancing, glass-bottomed boats to view the submarine gardens, fishing, speedboat rides—everything but Tommy Dorsey and the Great White Steamship.

But the Coronados were not destined to become another Catalina Island, and the project failed. For years the old buildings stood desolate and hopeless, until they were appropriated by the Mexican government to house its military base.

Rumors of reestablishing the resort or developing the islands for commercial purposes still surface now and again, but the Mexican government will make no comment.

Others hope Los Coronados will stay as they are. A silent reminder of a time long past.

ww